

Book Review

The Dispossessed

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The Dispossessed (1974) by [Ursula K. Le Guin](#) (1929—2018) is a long, slow, well-crafted science fiction novel set several hundred years in the future when the Earth (Terra) has been driven to ecological ruin by its inhabitants (the Terrans) whose population has dwindled to only 500M. Those few survive under a totalitarian post-apocalyptic society, and only then by receiving charitable subsidies from the alien Hainish civilization. I read [the 2006 HarperCollins ePub edition](#) which is formatted well (with a table of contents) and includes a study guide by Paul Brians.

But *The Dispossessed* is not about the Terrans and their struggles. That planet is only mentioned a few times in the entire book. Rather it takes place several light years away on twin planets orbiting [Tau Ceti](#). Urras is a lush planet with several competing class societies including A-Io, a capitalist state very similar to the present-day USA, and its rival, the state socialist Thu (with “A money economy based on the principle that each worker is paid as he deserves, for the value of his labor,” and apparently doesn’t even pretend to be pursuing Communism unlike its Bolshevik counterparts familiar to Terrans). The same revolutionary movement that produced Thu as a socialist super power also produced a libertarian revolt within A-Io.

The libertarians called themselves Odonians, adherents to the anarchist principles espoused by a philosopher named Odo. This is a little odd from a Terran anarchist’s perspective where, unlike Marxists and academics, we tend not to adopt the name of thinkers for our schools. There are communist anarchists, for example, but not “Kropotkinists”; and insurrectionary anarchists but not “Bonannonians,” mutualists more so than

“Proudhonians”... But the greater difficulty for me while reading was that the Odo I know is [the alien cop](#) from *Deep Space Nine*, which makes for some confusing confluences with the alien anarchist from Urras.

Rather than risking the spread of Odonian sedition, the A-Io authorities allowed any of the revolutionaries who were willing to settle with clemency on Anarres, Urras’s uninhabited (except for a few mining camps), arid moon-planet. There, by the time the novel begins, the Odonians have established a worldwide [anarcho-syndicalist](#) society on Anarres that has functioned for more than 150 years. And, conveniently for the Urrastis, it also functions as a productive ore-producing colony that sends several full freighters back to the homeworld every year as part of the peace agreement.

The way Le Guin sets up this world of exciting hope and experimental freedom embedded in, walled in by, realpolitik considerations, both in the Anarresti dealings with the offworld capitalists but also within the nominally anarchist syndicates themselves, grants it a feeling of authenticity that a naive utopia would lack. Even if we can defeat or at least escape from the principalities, powers, and rulers of this world, how can we escape from each other? There’s a Pat the Bunny song I used to listen to before my overnight shifts at Walmart (“We’re up all night dreaming / We aren’t alive as long as there’s a prison guard still breathing / So we’re up all night scheming / [We don’t get tired, we get even](#)”) which speaks of this anarchist anxiety Le Guin has organically captured in her ambiguous utopia:

I'll still be on my own
In the community we're building.
But that could never change,
Any society is prison to me.

One of the stranger aspects of Anarres to me is how its inhabitants, after doing their share of necessary labour, free to do anything, all seem to dedicate themselves to specialized jobs. We meet a physicist, a fish geneticist, a truck driver, a machinist... but nowhere the hobbyist, the polymath, fully realized individual every Terran communist philosopher has promised. Even the poor playwright driven to insanity by the rejection of his peers just keeps writing the same play over and over again rather than develop his interests in other fields. These people have freed themselves from exploitative class society, but decided to take their jobs with them into their new world. I guess that's about as syndicalist as a revolution can get.

The Dispossessed tells the life story of Shevek, an Anarresti theoretical physicist and a good Odonian who becomes stifled by his own community and travels to the capitalist world in order to work out his theories. The Anarresti, you see, have adopted a contradictory policy of "anarchism on one planet" and have grown fearful of any outsiders. Our protagonist eventually sets himself the task of correcting that, of abolishing borders... with science.

The book is structured so that every other chapter details Shevek's earlier life on Anarres while the alternating chapters describe his time visiting Urras where he struggles to complete his theoretical work on time on time. I enjoyed that structure, it helped break up some of the slower narrative. But even so, the

first seven chapters are very dry. Boring, in my experience. In those chapters, on both Anarres and Urras, Shevek mostly mopes around universities. He doesn't have any real friends or enemies, and a major conflict in the first half of the book is when he was slightly embarrassed to live alone with an orange blanket.

One synchronicity is that the other book I read at the same time was *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, Robert Kanigel's biography of the Indian mathematician [Srinivasa Ramanujan](#). That book describes the two worlds inhabited by Ramanujan: India, where nobody recognizes his genius, and university life in Cambridge where he briefly lives after being discovered by a famous English mathematician and where he works out many of his most striking theorems. From quarrels with his mother, travel to another world, separation from his wife, return home, and mathematical glimpses of infinity it feels very similar in tone, structure, and content to *The Dispossessed*. But I think the similarities to Ramanujan's life are coincidence; I don't think his story was widely known outside of India (to non-mathematicians) at the time Le Guin was writing. I've [read](#) that Le Guin actually based Shevek's character on her memories of J. Robert Oppenheimer (with whom her parents were apparently friends).

Even in the boring first half there were some memorable moments. One is when Shevek and his childhood friends on Anarres learn in school what prisons are. The other is a conversation between Shevek and a misogynist at an Anarres truck stop through which the reader (if they were like me and assumed otherwise) learns that Odo was a woman.

Once things do finally start happening toward the end of the

book, Shevek seems almost irrelevant as he becomes a passive stand-in for a messianic figure. With some inspiration from good old Einstein (Ainsetain the Terran) he is able to finish his theorems, and with the help of his servant, Efor, he is able to escape his handlers on Urras and finally meet some Urrasti anarchists and rabble rousers. Efor is one character in the novel I almost liked. I thought he was an undercover cop. But it turns out he was not only legitimately proletarian, but also, conveniently, a revolutionary sympathizer (he mentions his daughter was named Laia, presumably after [Laia Odo](#)).

The reliance on Einstein felt like a leak in Le Guin's world building, bringing the reader crashing back to twentieth century Earth. Her political systems don't namedrop any real social theorist and feel all the more authentic and self-contained for it. (Though at one point Shevek states that the technology made possible by his theories could threaten the Urrasti's enemies "With the annihilation of space" which is maybe a reference to Marx's description of advances in communication technology as "The annihilation of space by time.") Her physics, I think, would have likewise felt more authentic without Ainsetain.

When Shevek meets Efor's anarchists, they explain to him why the authorities have been preoccupied with confining him. "It's not just because they want this idea of yours. But because you are an idea. A dangerous one. The idea of anarchism, made flesh. Walking amongst us." He then attends a large protest where he narrowly escapes being shot by police himself, but spends three nights hiding entombed in a cellar with a dying comrade as the police round people up outside. He then emerges and appears at the friendly embassy of the totalitarian Terrans who immediately agree to publish his theories to the public

domain and give him a ride home. The final chapter is his ascension to the moon. Easy peasy.

True journey may be return, but throughout the book, first when nothing happens and then later when Shevek stumbles into his Christological role, I couldn't help thinking that, like in something out of Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*, Le Guin accidentally wrote about the wrong Anarresti and there was a more interesting story happening elsewhere the entire time.